

Nathan Brown  
 “Do You Hear What I Hear?”  
 January 18, 2008  
 West Side Christian Church

1 Samuel 3:1-10

During his popular radio show on October 8, 2001, Rush Limbaugh announced, “I am, for all practical purposes, deaf, and it's happened in three months.” It was a tragic story about a man with a terrible disability. Fortunately, Limbaugh has regained much of his hearing through the use of cochlear implants — a device implanted inside the human skull and connected with tiny wires to a microphone.

The implant allows a sort of hearing for the hearing-impaired. It is a kind of artificial ear that converts sound into impulses that the hearing nerves can understand. Evidently, these implants have been highly successful in Limbaugh's case, greatly exceeding his doctor's expectations.

However, some folks trained in alternative medicine wrote about Limbaugh's case and described it as “a classic example of mental imbalances manifesting as a physical ailment.” They said, “Of course he lost his hearing! He didn't need it, for he doesn't listen to anybody anyway. He already knows the truth, so why should he listen?”

They further pointed out that Limbaugh lost complete hearing in his left ear, but retained a minimal amount of hearing in his right. “This makes perfect sense,” they said, “because Limbaugh has never, ever listened to a single word spoken by those on the left, but will sometimes listen a bit to words spoken by those on the right.” The cochlear implant gives the deaf ears to hear, but with it, can they listen?<sup>1</sup>

Our story about Samuel this morning is a story about the difference between hearing and listening. Three times Samuel hears his name called out by the Lord and three times Samuel misinterprets who is calling him. Finally, Eli recognizes what is happening and he says to Samuel, “Go lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” And when the Lord calls again, Samuel does as Eli tells him. He listens to the Lord. As a result, Samuel becomes a Hebrew Judge and prophet for the people of Israel.

Samuel, Rush Limbaugh, you, me, we all have a hard time listening. Henri Nouwen refers to this phenomenon as us, “Living absurd lives.” Nouwen writes about the meaning of that word “absurd.” *Surd*, Nouwen says, is from the Latin word for “deaf.” When you look the word up in the dictionary you will find, “not to be heard, dull, deaf,” but you will also find, “insensible, laughably inconsistent with what is judged as true or reasonable.” It is our inability to listen, that creates the conditions for an absurd life.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Hall, <http://www.alternativeapproaches.com/health/limbaugh/limbaugh.htm>. Retrieved 1/12/2003.

Nouwen writes: “A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow his guidance.” Absurd living is simply not listening to God. We need to avoid absurd living.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that hearing is easier than listening. It doesn’t take as much time and energy. It doesn’t require commitment. It is also an involuntary sense. We hear even when we do not want to hear. Hearing is passive.

Listening, on the other hand, is different. It requires intentionality. It necessitates discernment and empathy. Listening is a learned behavior, not a natural one. It takes time, energy, and commitment. Listening is an active practice.

I was talking with Martha, the minister over at Simonsdale Presbyterian Church, this week at our lectionary group. She said that the other morning, she was headed to church with her four-year old son, William, when the NPR reporter on the radio began to talk about the violence taking place in Gaza.

The reporter said, “Thirty people died today in the Gaza Strip from a roadside bomb.” Immediately, William said to his mother, “Oh no! Thirty people died! Why, mommy?” Martha said to me, “I realized in that moment that I hear a lot, but I don’t listen anymore.”

Each night we hear on the news about the young African American male who robs the convenience store. We hear about the middle aged white male who is accused of child molestation. We hear about the violence in Iraq, Gaza, and Afghanistan. But do we listen? Are we affected by what we hear? Do we, like William, take the time to simply ask, “Why?”

Of course, part of reality is such that we can’t listen to everything. The noise of our culture is so pervasive that to try to listen to everything would simply be too overwhelming. Talking heads, pundits, politicians, heads of state, religious leaders, even one another—trying to listen to it all is really unrealistic.

On the other hand, what has happened in our efforts to insulate ourselves from the overwhelming noise is that we have inoculated ourselves from one another. As a result, like Samuel, we misinterpret God’s voice as someone dispelling an opinion different from our own or a thought not in line with our thinking, and God’s call goes in one ear and out the other.

It is interesting that this passage from 1 Samuel begins with the phrase, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” The Word of the Lord is rare in our own day, isn’t it? Perhaps, in part, we are anesthetized to the noise of our world because the good news is hard to find.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in David J. Wood's sermon "Prophetic Acoustics" printed in *Biblical Preaching Journal* –Winter 2003, p. 8-9.

In some ways, we have probably given up listening for God's voice because we have been burned too many times. We have been hurt. We have been deceived. We have been violated. And listening requires the possibility of being changed—of God's voice speaking to us and transforming us in a new and exciting way.

In the 1700s, many churches here in America appointed one of their members to be, what they called, a tithingman. The tithingman had a very important job in the life of the church. His job was to ensure that order was maintained during the Sunday worship services. So the church member who was appointed to be the tithingman would sit at a table in the front of the sanctuary, usually right in front of the pulpit, and he would keep an eye on the congregation to make sure that everyone behaved themselves.

In particular, it was the tithingman's job to make sure that everyone stayed awake during the sermon—no easy undertaking, as you might imagine. But to help him carry out that task, the tithingman was equipped with a rather long pole with a big, hard knob on the end of it. If the tithingman saw some man or some boy nod off, he would pick up his pole, walk down the aisle and poke the man or boy in the head to wake him up.

Quite often the tithingman poked them hard enough to give them a lump or a bruise on their forehead. In the case of women or girls who fell asleep, they got off a little bit easier. For them, the tithingman used the other end of his pole, which usually had a rabbit's foot or a fox tail on it, and he would wave that in their face to tickle them awake.<sup>3</sup>

You know, I have decided that I don't think this is such a bad idea. So after the service this morning, if you'd like to apply to be our church's tithingman, talk to me and we'll see about getting you a table to sit at up here in the front of the sanctuary and a nice sturdy pole for you to use.

Obviously, I am kidding. The point, however, of the tithingman is a good one. We need to constantly be reminded of the importance of listening. There are too many reasons not to listen. It is too overwhelming, it takes too much time and effort, it might cause us pain, it could require us to change. Listening to God and listening to one another makes us vulnerable. But if we don't listen, we cannot know where we are being called by God.

Yesterday, I gathered with nine of you at Cradock Baptist Church to not only help, but also observe how Angel Food Ministry, the ministry we are taking on here at West Side, works. At five o'clock in the morning, a semi stops in front of the church and thousands of pounds of food are stacked up to be distributed to the community.

Seven different ministries arrived, from the Eastern North Carolina/Eastern Virginia area, all to take this food back to their respective communities to distribute the food to those they serve. As it was each ministry's turn to receive their food, the director

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<sup>3</sup> Bowen, Edward. "Are You Listening?" *Lectionary Homiletics*. Back Issues Plus. 1 Samuel 3:1-10.

would call out how many boxes of particular kinds of food they needed to meet their orders. “Five boxes of t-bone steaks.” “Three boxes of peas.” “Two cases of milk.”

Each time he called out a food order, those of us working heard his request. We responded accordingly, obediently bringing over the number of boxes being called for. However, as I watched all of these people stand in seventeen degree weather, working together across denominational lines, I stopped hearing and started listening.

What I discovered wasn’t necessarily audible. I am not sure anyone else was listening. But in the midst of “Five boxes of t-bone steaks” and “three boxes of peas,” I listened, “I am a single mother on welfare and I have three children to feed.” I listened, “I am a mother and a father trying to make ends meet for my family in these tough economic times.” I listened, “I just need a little help this month, Jesus. Please provide for me.”

As a congregation, we have listened for God to lead us toward a vision for a future. In our listening, we have discovered the call to re-connect to our community—to go outside our doors and become church beyond our walls. As we begin to fulfill this part of our vision through Angel Food Ministry, let us remember that by listening, we have made ourselves vulnerable—at times we might feel overwhelmed, at times it might feel like too much time and energy, at times it might cause us some pain.

But hopefully, by having listened to God and continuing to listen to God through our community, we might, like Samuel, be transformed to serve God more faithfully.

Amen.